

**0860/27/11**

NATIONAL THURSDAY, 26 APRIL  
QUALIFICATIONS 10.35 AM – 11.25 AM  
2012

ENGLISH  
STANDARD GRADE  
Foundation Level  
Reading  
Text

Read carefully the passage overleaf. It will help if you read it twice. When you have done so, answer the questions. Use the spaces provided in the Question/Answer booklet.





*In this article, the writer describes her experiences catching snakes in Swaziland.*

- 1 **IT'S PAST MIDNIGHT** when the telephone rings. I drag myself out of bed.
- 2 The woman on the other end of the phone is hysterical. Her name is Sanele, and she is crying and screaming. Between her sobs, I can hear a young child in the background shouting, "It's coming in: the snake is coming in!" From Sanele's frenzied description, I manage to establish that a large, slender snake has reached the doorway, trapping her toddler and baby daughter. It is about 3m long—probably a black mamba, I think to myself (mamba is a Zulu word meaning "big snake"). Still in pyjamas, I grab my trusty snake tongs—a gadget for handling snakes that resembles a park keeper's litter-grabber—and rush off into the rainy night.
- 3 As I drive to the farm, I feel more certain of the mystery snake's identity. Black mambas are highly inquisitive and frequently enter people's homes, seeking refuge in schoolbags and cupboards and under beds—anywhere they can squeeze into. Like many other reptiles, they look for a cool location when the summer heat becomes unbearable, and a nice warm spot during the winter. Unfortunately, houses fit the bill perfectly.
- 4 The rain is coming down in bucketloads now. I try to keep my vehicle on the muddy track through the sugarcane fields, steering with one hand and holding my mobile phone to my ear with the other. Sanele begs me to hurry, blurting that her one and only candle has almost burned out. Tears of relief stream down my own face when, after an hour, I find the farm at last.

#### **DICING WITH DEATH**

- 5 Sanele is standing perilously close to the curled up mamba, holding her broom like a weapon, ready to bash the intruder to a pulp if it dares move another inch. This is a fatal mistake—no mamba I have ever come across will just wait by while you take a hefty swing at it. Instead, it will strike with deadly accuracy. Rule number 1: if you are close enough to kill a snake, it is most certainly close enough to kill you.

6 Using my tongs, I carefully remove the creature and pop it in a snake bag. Sanele immediately rushes forwards to hug her children, and I complete the rescue by teaching the correct first-aid procedure and explaining the basics of snake safety. As usual, I emphasise the importance of staying still when in close proximity to a venomous snake.

7 There's a very good reason for this: snakes sense what's going on around them in a completely different way to us. Since snakes have poor eyesight, sudden, jerky movements that take them by surprise are almost guaranteed to upset them. So if you ever find yourself face to face with a black mamba, it is essential to keep calm. The snake will strike defensively only if it senses threatening movement.

### **KEEP YOUR DISTANCE**

8 Mambas belong to the family which also contains the cobras and sea snakes—species equally feared for their powerful venom. One of four species of mamba, the black is named not for the colour of its body—it is brownish, olive or greyish overall—but for the inky black lining to its mouth. If cornered, it flicks its jaws open to reveal this bold colour as a warning to keep your distance. To make sure its threat is understood, the snake lifts its head well off the ground, flattens its neck into a slight hood and gives a hollow-sounding hiss. It's an altogether frightening display.

9 The black mamba has a reputation for being extremely aggressive. It is said to be able to outrun a person on a horse and to 'stare' at its victims as if to spook them. Some local people even believe that black mambas hunt humans. All of these claims are totally wrong. In my experience, black mambas will more often than not do their best to get away as quickly as possible, slithering towards the nearest hollow tree, termite mound, burrow or dark corner. They become aggressive only when there is no escape route.

10 In the meantime, the snake-rescuer's life is a busy one. Every season I rescue about 600 snakes, of which 100 or so are black mambas. I run *Antivenom Swazi*, a charity whose mission is to raise enough funds to create a 'bank' of anti-venom for treating snakebite victims in Swaziland, a small country beside South Africa. My plan is to store the anti-venom in two different locations, so that everyone can get some within two hours.

11 Speed is essential. Mamba venom is fast-acting. The bite itself is usually not very painful with little or no swelling, but the first symptoms are felt within 15 minutes—much sooner if the victim is a small child. Breathing difficulties develop rapidly, leading to death within a few hours. Just two drops of venom are fatal, and a mamba may deliver as much as 10 times that amount in a single bite; each individual mamba has enough venom to kill up to 14 adult humans.

12 Snakebite in Africa is becoming much more common. Farmers in Swaziland are particularly at risk, because farms are ideal mamba habitat. The dense fields of sugarcane and maize are full of prey: rats, mice, gerbils, shrews, small birds and sometimes baby chicks are all taken. The mambas come out just after sunrise, climbing up the cane or maize to about chest height, then stay in the sun for an hour or two before moving away to hunt. In the late afternoon, they slink off to their lairs for the night.

13 Anti-venom—the only cure—is not easily available in Swaziland, and in any case is so expensive that locals can't afford it. Eighty per cent of the country's population rely on traditional healers, who prescribe a herbal medicine known as *mooty* to treat snakebite. But while such remedies can be effective for some illnesses, they are useless against the powerful venom of a mamba.

#### **IN THE NICK OF TIME**

14 The phone rings again. It is the second time that I have received a call for help from this particular farm, which is situated in dense bush. It is a long drive on a bad dirt road. When I finally arrive, I am met by a frantic father and his family, who physically drag me out of my vehicle. I am rushed into the house, where I find a young boy lying in bed. On top of the sheet is a huge mamba.

15 We freeze. If we make a mistake or the child moves, there's a very good chance he will be bitten. I try to calm him and edge towards the snake and lift it off the child in one smooth motion. Luckily, the previous snake-safety course I gave at this farm has saved the youngster from a fatal bite.

16 It's a happy ending this time. Black mambas are part of our lives, whether we like it or not, and we must learn to live with them.

Adapted from an article in  
BBC Wildlife Magazine

[END OF PASSAGE]

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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